

Davis, Dewey & Main Buildings Transition to Open Office Design: Information & Guidelines

Introduction

This document gives information about Open Office Design (OOD) and guidelines for working in the open office environments in Davis, Dewey, and Main Buildings. This document does not address every question or cover guidelines that may be Agency-specific. Rather, it is meant to provide you with basic information to help you make the shift to working in an open office environment.

Open Office Design (OOD) reflects and encourages changes in the way people work. With the redesign of National Life campus buildings, Vermont takes a bold step, joining other leaders in workplace innovation. OOD addresses many opportunities, including: enabling advanced technology, preparing for changing workforce demographics, creating healthy work environments, saving money over time, and encouraging interagency collaboration and the evolution of teamwork.

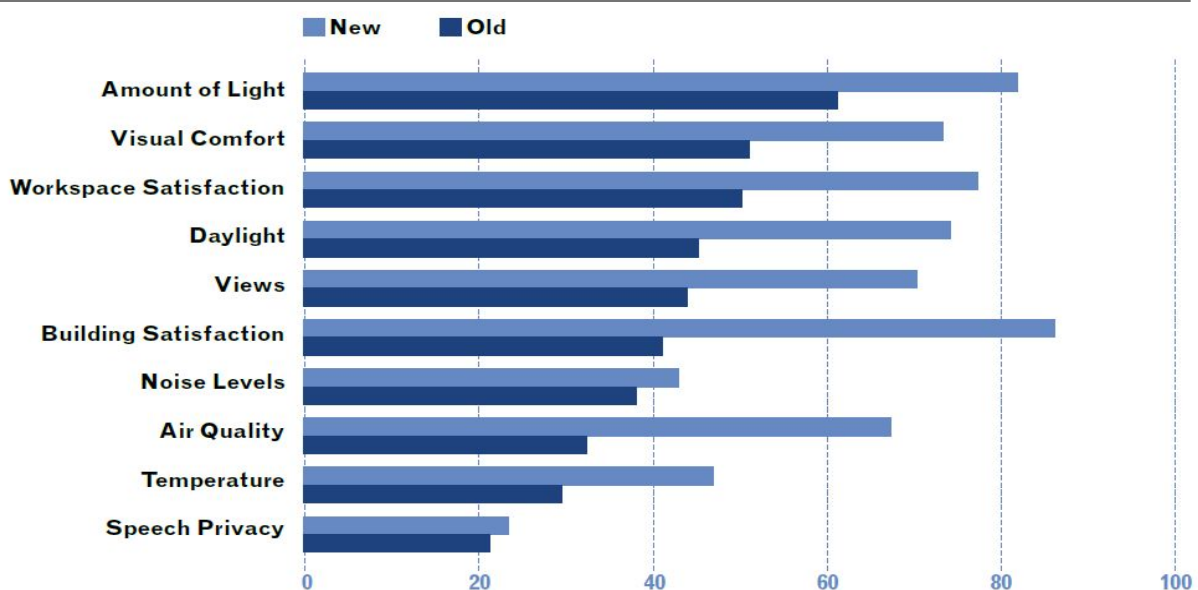
New Vermont State Office Space Standards (August, 2012) state the goals for improved Vermont workspaces in this way:

- Employee equity. All employees have equal access to attractive space, abundant natural light, and quality air circulation
- Multiple workspace options
- Extending the life and use of materials with furniture, technology, and work tools that are easily configured and flexible
- Enhanced flexibility as work processes change
- Accommodating an increasingly mobile workforce
- Modeling workspace innovation
- Creating a modern attractive workspace that meets the expectation of those entering the workforce helping to attract the best new talent (Vermont Space Management Guidelines, February, 2012, p. 1 & 8.)

The use of OOD is growing dramatically. In addition to the federal GSA, states using OOD include New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services; a handful of New York agencies and departments, including the Department of Transportation and their equivalent of ACCD; all leased space in Massachusetts government; the Missouri Department of Health.

GSA 20-20 Research showed greater worker satisfaction in open environments. (White Paper, the New Federal Workplace, June 2009.) A GSA survey of 24,000 federal employees reflected greater satisfaction with their new open office environment for light, visual comfort, noise levels, air quality, speech privacy, and several other factors. *(Included in PowerPoint presentation, Vermont State Offices at National Life, slide 6. Complete presentation at <http://bgs.vermont.gov/FutureWorkspace>)*

FIG 2. PERCENT SATISFIED WITH ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS



MYTH:

High cubicle partitions mean less noise, more privacy, and fewer distractions.

(From a Federal GSA survey of 24,000 government employees transitioning from high-wall cubicles to an open plan)

REALITY:

Not true. Research shows that higher cubicle partitions block standing line of sight but provide small amounts of additional acoustical shielding. But this increase in 'visual privacy' may encourage people to talk louder because they think they have more privacy. Unfortunately, there may be less privacy and more disruption.

Kinds of Workspaces; Working in Your Workstation

Besides workstations, there are four kinds of work areas in the Davis, Dewey and Main buildings: focus rooms (also called team rooms), hotel spaces, conference rooms, and (in some cases) other quiet areas such as the ANR DEC library.

The shifts in workstation design reflect the fact that tall partitions block light, views and airflow while affording no acoustical privacy benefits.

- Focus rooms, which are small rooms, are a way to maximize use of space, encourage interaction, and promote equity through having small meeting rooms available to everyone. Vermont Space Standards call for one focus room per 20 people. Vermont State Office Space Standards. (August, 2012, p. 6)
- Focus rooms have two uses. They are for small meetings that are either planned or impromptu; for individuals when they are doing work that requires extra focus
- Some work stations may be designated as hotel spaces where contractors, field office, or other non-local employees work for part of the week.
- Conference rooms are larger rooms for larger meetings and trainings.

Working in open office guidelines

- Sight lines are “common space.” Keep sight lines free of anything that obstructs views above workstation heights. Ad hoc constructions and decorations above these heights create “false walls” and block views. In keeping with the goal of Open Office Design, everyone should be allowed to enjoy the natural light, windows, and open space.
- Personalize your workstation space within the guidelines given in this document and using common sense that stays mindful of the fact that workstations are public sector, state space.
- Remembering that you work in an open room, please keep your area neat and uncluttered.
- Personal items should be contained within individual workstations.
- In keeping with the open office concept, plants should not obscure views.
- When using focus rooms for discussion, in general, move to a focus room when you need to have more than a short exchange or when conversing with two or more people.
- If you hear someone’s private conversation, don’t repeat it.
- Resist the temptation to chime into a conversation you are not apart of.
- Be mindful of not carelessly questioning or joking about colleagues’ work habits.
- Although there is no door, still “knock” by letting the person know you are entering their work station; avoid hovering where your colleague cannot see you or launching into a conversation without asking for permission to talk.
- Develop signs and signals that let people know when you are not available to talk.
- If you have equipment or furniture problems or requests, see information about the “punch lists” and BRIN forms, below, under “move process.”
- Be mindful that the state is a tenant and that the building is owned by National Life Group.
- Agencies or departments may wish to keep track of focus room and hotel space use for several months so that they have real data for analyzing whether there are enough, how frequently they are used, etc. (so that space modification requests can be made, if needed.)
- In general, conference rooms need to be reserved. As of January, 2013, a campus reservation system is under development. AOT and ACCD have a tradition of using each other’s conference rooms to find meeting spaces of the right size for specific meetings and training.

Sound and Acoustical Privacy

Noise reduction systems are used throughout the National Life campus. Sound masking technology consists of a series of loudspeakers installed in a grid-like pattern above the ceiling. These loudspeakers distribute a controlled background sound throughout the facility.

Sound and acoustical privacy measures are reflected in Vermont State Office Space Standards (August, 2012):

1. "Spaces will include carpet and ceiling tiles with an NRC (Noise Reduction Coefficient) of not less than 0.60 for spaces using existing ceilings and grids, or, if new ceilings are included, tiles with an NRC above 0.70 shall be used.
2. Neither fixed nor moveable walls may be placed along exterior walls where connections to exterior glass or interruption by HVAC components will allow noise transmission between spaces.
3. Large open office workspaces with over 25 occupants will include noise cancelling systems ("white noise" systems which emit sound waves that are counter-frequency to human speech.)
4. To the greatest extent practicable, all employees in a workspace will have access to daylight, and, whenever possible, views through an exterior window. No private offices or meeting spaces shall be placed along exterior walls or in a manner that would entirely block view access. In addition to blocking view access, it is much more difficult to soundproof a room that is against an exterior wall or window." (Vermont State Office Space Standards, August, 2012, p. 4.)

There is a "common belief that noise is only truly under control when a space is as silent as possible. However, just as with light and temperature, there is a comfort zone with the volume of sound and it is not zero." (*Moeler, Niklas. Sound Masking: 3C's: Control, Comfort, Confidentiality. Complete report at <http://bgs.vermont.gov/FutureWorkspace>*)

In OOD, fabric on panels, carpeting, white noise system, and the acoustic ceiling help mitigate sound transmission. At the same time, behavioral adjustments will need to be made. The following guidelines will help.

Working in open office guidelines

- Use library voices. (Note that this behavior also helps in older spaces with high cubicles, where the myth persists that high cubicle walls make a work space quieter.)
- Use focus rooms for conversations of any length, for meetings, and for conversations involving three or more people.
- Keep in mind that focus rooms are designed and intended to be quiet. They were not built to be soundproof.
- Plan your day with the kind of need for quiet, uninterrupted time figured into these plans. Using this strategy may help you decide when to move to a focus room or other specifically built quiet room (such as the ANR DEC library.)
- Resist conversing over workstation partitions.
- Phones: set the ringer on low or vibrate. Try to pick up the phone within two rings. Avoid using a speaker phone (except in a focus or conference room.) For agencies where employees use state-owned mobile phones, turn off the ringer when you leave your space or carry your phone.

- Limit conversations in open areas; be particularly aware of workers who are adjacent to main walkways.

Visual and Acoustical Focus, Privacy, and Confidentiality of Information

As the header of this section implies, this is a cluster of overlapping issues. The following are practices that involve regulating interaction between you, your colleagues, and your office environment. Through the workspaces, design, behavior, and equipment (e.g., hardware to block casual viewing of computer screens), a balance is sought between the need to focus on specific kinds of work and the desirability of productive, creative interaction; between privacy and shared space.

Working in open office guidelines

- Use focus rooms when visual and/or acoustical privacy are needed.
- Use your library voice to encourage both acoustical focus and adequate privacy for you, colleagues, and clients.
- Be especially mindful of the need for using your library voice when entering and leaving conference or focus rooms.
- If visitors are not aware of OOD practices, speaking in your library voice can provide quick guidance to them.
- There is a process for exploring flex time and alternative work schedule options; this process is not related to the advent of OOD. Since telecommuting and alternatives schedules are at the discretion of the agency, speak with your manager.
- Especially when new habits are forming, you may need to remind each other if voice volume is an issue. Be receptive to such a reminder if it is offered to you
- Each time you leave your workstation lock your computer, especially when working on something confidential.
- Do not leave confidential information up on your screen when you leave your work station.
- Consider using hardware that blocks others' view of your computer screen. Note that this may be an agency-wide, room-specific, or work function-specific measure.

Air Quality and Odors

Working in open office guidelines

- Be mindful of perfume and perfumed products; consider using non-scented products.
- Eat strongly-scented foods in another area, like the cafeteria or break room.

- Let neighbors and/or your supervisor know your air quality needs, including sensitivities, allergies, and health requirements. Individuals and supervisors may consult with DHR for assistance.
- Speak up. As with noise issues, do not hesitate to make colleagues aware of your sensitivities and be open to this input from others.

Safety and Security

Working in open office guidelines

- Keep wallets, etc. in a locked drawer or cabinet, if it was provided as part of your room renovation.
- Promptly report thefts or apparent thefts to your manager so patterns can be tracked and solutions found at the room or building level.

Storage

Storage is part of the larger records management challenges in state government. Global recommendations for OOD will not and are not intended to solve these larger and ongoing challenges. Vermont State Office Space Standards, (August, 2012, pg. 6) give the following basic information about furniture and equipment:

- Movable coat racks and coat stands are provided in selected areas.
- Three-drawer lateral files are distributed throughout each space.
- There is approximately one copy/supply room for each 75 occupants. These rooms contain the high-volume multifunction printer/scanner/copiers as well as countertop and cabinets.

Working in open office guidelines

- Purge and merge, where possible.
- Work with your agency to address further storage needs.

Preparing to Move and Getting Settled

Each agency gives move instructions, based upon a common “move directions checklist” that move coordinators and designated leaders use and tailor to each agency’s needs. (*Move Directions Checklist at <http://bgs.vermont.gov/FutureWorkspace>*)

Procedures for current National Life campus security/lockdown/evacuation procedures are at <http://bgs.vermont.gov/FutureWorkspace>. National Life Group owns the building, and so that document reflects their procedures. As of January, 2013, the Buildings and

General Services (BGS) Safety office is working with National Life Group to review and clarify procedures as they specifically apply to Open Office Design, and you will receive additional information when it is available.

General guidelines

- Once you have moved, if you have complaints or workstation change requests, please use your agency's "punch list" process. This list is managed by your move coordinator and is used to track all requests. In general, wait two weeks before submitting requests to your move coordinator, who adds the request to the punch list. This frequently updated list goes from your move coordinator to BGS for action.
- In general, people will occupy their new workstation for two weeks before changes are made to the space or to work stations. People may give fit-up feedback and make requests at any time. Punch list requests do not have to be made within the first two weeks of working in the new space.
- Let your supervisor know if you have a request for accommodation. (For example, ergonomic issues can be addressed during this two-week period.) Supervisors should notify the move coordinator and copy your Department of Human Resources (DHR) field representative.
- Standing height stations that are requested before the move should be in place before you move in. If these stations are not in place, tell your move coordinator so that this information can be added to your agency's punch list.
- People should not make informal agreements to trade workstations with office mates. Fit-ups for space, station type, and equipment are specific.
- Remember that Vermont agencies are tenants in leased space that is owned by National Life Group. This relationship marks a change for some new Dewey, Davis and Main Building residents, who are used to working in office space owned by the state. This tenant/landlord relationship means that fitting up and "decorating" (e.g., hanging clocks, pictures, etc. on permanent walls) spaces, as well as reporting space-related problems, requires going through channels, asking permission, etc. All requests to hang things on permanent walls, as well as all reporting of space-related problems, should go to your Space Contact in your agency. This person sends requests through BGS, and only through BGS, to National Life Group. Under no circumstances should individual employees drill holes or affix hangings to permanent walls.